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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to explore readers' ability to identify information of high and low importance. Specifically, the study explored (1) whether the ability to prioritize or structure information in texts was consonant with proficient reading, (2) whether the ability to prioritize information from texts was dependent upon the memory capacity and/or decoding ability of the reader, and (3) whether the ability to prioritize information that is read follows a developmental sequence. Subjects--75 third-grade and 62 fifth-grade students from two elementary schools identified as high, middle, or low reading achievers--read orally and silently an expository passage from an unfamiliar elementary social studies textbook. They then rated units within the text as of high, middle, or low importance. Analysis of student scoring indicated that in both third and fifth grades the more proficient readers appear to have a greater ability to identify priority information in expository texts. Results suggest a developmental trend, because at every achievement level the performance of fifth graders was greater than that of third graders within the same achievement levels. The major implication of this study points to the need for children to be given aid and instruction in the identification of important pieces of information from texts. (EL)

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READERS' IDENTIFICATION OF LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE IN EXPOSITORY TEXTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Reading involves the construction of meaning from a text. As part of this process the reader needs to decide, albeit tacitly, which units of information from the text are important for the understanding of the passage. The reader must internally prioritize the incoming information relative to the overall theme and major points of the text and integrates the higher levels of information (i.e. the relevant meanings) with existing knowledge structures. Such information should be retrievable from memory with relative ease. On the other hand, information of low importance in the passage is less likely to be integrated with existing knowledge and less likely to be remembered.

The work of Meyer and her colleagues demonstrates that the level of importance of textual information in expository texts is a salient variable for reading research. Using her own classification scheme Meyer (1975, 1977; Britton, Meyer, Simpson, Holdredge, and Curry, 1979) found that top level information in expository texts was more easily recalled than information at lower levels of the text structure. These results presuppose an ability in readers to identify information of high and low importance. Is such an ability, however, inherent to all readers? Possibly not. Meyer, Brandt, and Bluth (1980), for example, found that an ability in ninth-grade subjects to identify top-level structures resulted in greater recall of readings over subjects who were not as able to identify structures. Moreover, B.J. Bartlett (1978) found that subjects could be trained to recognize top-level structures and that such training improved textual recall.

Several questions then arise from this foundation. First, is the ability to prioritize or structure information in texts an ability

that is consonant with proficient reading? Do good and poor readers have differential abilities in identifying the major points of a passage and in identifying units of information in the passage that are relevant to those major points? Secondly, is the ability to prioritize information from texts dependent upon the memorial capacity and/or decoding ability of the reader? Third, does the ability to prioritize information that is read follow a developmental sequence? The present study attempted to explore these questions using expository texts with children in grades three and five.

PROCEDURES

The subjects for the study were 75 third-grade and 62 fifth-grade students from two elementary schools. The students were identified as high, middle, or low based upon their performance on the appropriate level of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests. Students whose scores were at or below the fourth stanine were identified as low reading achievers. Students scoring within the fifth stanine were identified as mid-level achievers, and students above the fifth stanine were considered high achievers. Each child orally and silently read an expository passage that was taken from an elementary social studies textbook that the children were not previously familiar with. The passages came from textbooks that were at the fourth- and sixth-grade levels.

The passages were initially parsed into units with each unit consisting of either a simple clause or complex sentence in which one idea or issue was developed. These units of information, along with the texts, were presented to a group of adult readers. After reading

the passages the adults were asked to rate each unit of information in relation to its importance within the entire passage and the major points conveyed in the passage. The adult raters assigned a rating of high, middle, or low for each information unit.

The adult ratings were then analyzed to identify information units of unanimous or near unanimous agreement. Items which were rated the same by 100% of the raters or which were rated the same by at least 75% were retained. An additional criterion was imposed in those instances of less than 100% agreement wherein the remaining responses were required to be in the adjacent rating category (i.e. if 75% of the norming sample gave a rating of "high" to a particular unit, the remaining 25% of the sample had to assign a "middle" rating). Eleven items meeting these criteria were chosen for each passage. They were then retyped (without reference to the adult ratings) for presentation to the student samples.

Following the reading of the appropriate passage by the third- and fifth-graders, the students were asked to rate each item in importance using the high-middle-low trichotomy used by the norming sample. They were told that each passage had a particular theme and certain major points that were to be conveyed to the readers. The students were asked to consider the major points of the passage and to rate each of the eleven information units according to its relative importance to the passage them and other main points.

Scoring

Each of the students' ratings were scored on a two-point scale. Thus, the maximum possible score was 22. One point was subtracted for each student-rating that was one rating unit apart from the norming sample (H-M and M-L), and two points were deducted for each student-rating that was two rating units apart from the norming key (H-L). Final rating scores were calculated for each subject. Means and standard deviations by grade and reading achievement levels are reported in Table 1.

Place Figure 1 about here

Analysis

A one-way (three achievement level) analysis of variance was performed for each grade level. The results of the analysis indicated that significant main effects were found for both grade three, $F(2,80) = 4.88$, $p < .01$, and grade five, $F(2,60) = 4.98$, $p < .01$. Follow-up tests revealed that all comparisons within grade levels, with the exception of the Low vs. Middle group comparison for grade five, were significant at the .05 level of probability.

These results indicate that at both third- and fifth-grades the more proficient readers appear to have a greater ability to identify priority information found in expository texts. The results

also suggest a developmental trend in this ability (though comparisons between grade levels of the same ability groups were nonsignificant). At every achievement level the performance of fifth-graders was greater than that of the third-graders within the same achievement levels. Although separate passages were used for each grade level the passages themselves were at approximately the same relative level of difficulty and the scoring scales employed were identical for both passages. Thus, the developmental trend is apparent even when possible differences in passage readability and scoring procedures are considered and accounted for.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of the present study indicate that children of different reading abilities differ in their ability to prioritize information that is read in expository texts. Moreover, because the subjects in the study were able to orally read the text and had the text displayed before them throughout the prioritizing task the main effects cannot be attributed solely to a difference in decoding ability or memorial capacity. Clearly the results suggest that poor readers do not have as great an ability to identify information of importance within a text as good readers. Comprehension difficulties of poor readers, then, are due to more than difficulties in decoding or sheer volume of information recalled. Additionally, the problem seems to be one of quality of information recalled. Poor readers, in addition to other reading related difficulties, have a lesser ability to distinguish between information of high and low importance and thus have difficulty in deciding which information should be retained in

memory because of its importance.

A second, less apparent finding suggests that this ability follows a developmental path. That is, the ability to identify information of high or low importance correspondingly increases with age for all reading achievement groups at the elementary level.

The major implication to emerge from the study points to the need for children to be given aid and instruction in the identification of important pieces of information from texts. Classroom discussions could easily center on the more important aspects of texts. Study guides, structured passage overviews, text outlines, and headings embedded within passages could also help to direct students to important aspects of texts. The results of the study also point out that the kinds of questions asked of children before or after reading a passage may either aid or hinder the development of an ability to prioritize information in texts. Clearly questions that direct students' attention to less important aspects of a text do little to aid the development of such an ability. An over-reliance on literal type questions, for example, may help to develop an attention to detail that is of little consequence or importance to the whole passage. Questions must be considered in light of the quality of information to which they direct the reader's attention.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research efforts are called for to verify the results

of this present study. Moreover, these efforts should also be directed toward children of other ages. Speculation would suggest that with further maturity the ability to identify important aspects of a passage should also increase.

Secondly research of this type might also be directed toward children's ability to identify important aspects of narrative materials. Children's greater exposure to story material would suggest a greater ability to identify key informational aspects from texts of this type (see Freedle and Hale, 1979). If so this may suggest a need to place more emphasis on learning from texts of an expository nature.

Finally, using a research paradigm similar to the one employed in the present study, future studies may wish to consider the effectiveness of textual organizers, questioning strategies, and/or other organizational methodologies in developing children's proficiency in prioritizing textual information.

	ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS					
	Low		Middle		High	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
GRADE THREE	11.77	2.35	14.00	1.97	15.87	2.11
GRADE FIVE	13.10	2.47	14.44	3.16	16.65	1.94

Figure 1
Means and Standard Deviation for Levels of Importance Scores for Grades Three and Five.

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